

Two Hurlburt Field heroes help crash victims, save lives

By Master Sgt. Randy Phelps
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"There were people staggering and people screaming. It was total chaos."

That was the scene Tech. Sgt. Mike Gray, a pararescuemen assigned to the 720th Special Tactics Group, Hurlburt Field, Fla., saw as he and his wife turned the corner from their home behind Martin Luther King Boulevard in Fort Walton Beach early Saturday morning.

Eight bicycle riders (several from Hurlburt Field) had pulled over in front of a local convenience store outside the gate of the base after one of the bikes had blown a tire. As the riders were standing off the road, waiting while the tire was being repaired, a 32-year-old Fort Walton Beach woman driving a Chevrolet Astro minivan drifted off the road and plowed through the group. The woman has been charged with one count of DUI (serious bodily injury) and four counts of DUI (personal injury) according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

Another Hurlburt Field employee, Mr. Randy Seeback, a retired Combat Controller who works as a contractor on the base, was driving his vehicle directly in front of the minivan. A bicyclist himself, Seeback had looked to see if he knew any of the riders as he was passing by, but didn't.

Then he heard the crash.

"When I turned around and looked, the van was almost right next to me off the shoulder and going through the ditch. She was going pretty fast and I don't think she hit her brakes at all. There were bikes and people falling off the van."

Instinctively, Seeback pulled out a cell phone and dialed 911.

"I reacted. I didn't think much about how to get started. I called, got people there and started helping people do things."

About thirty seconds after Seeback made the call to 911, Gray pulled around the corner.

"So many times Combat Controllers are talking on the radio and bringing in the choppers and doing the mass casualties while the PJs (pararescuemen) are doing the treatment," Gray said. "To me he was the on-scene commander. We just started treating people, like a normal triage situation."

Gray, a PJ for about 12 years, said he always travels with his 35-pound medical kit in his car. So, he began treating people. The first was unconscious. He opened the man's airway, but there was little else he could do for him, so he started down the line. There was about 100 yards of bicycles and people strung out along the road from where the van first made contact with the group to where the van came to a rest in a water-filled ditch on the side of the road.

Another man was screaming with a broken leg. He did a quick assessment and found he had no major bleeding problems so he continued on. Then he went to the van where other people were screaming and found a woman under the van, face down in the water. With the help of some other people who had stopped, Gray helped pull the woman from under the van.

"She was in waist deep water, face down and in shock." Gray said "She would have been dead for sure."

Meanwhile, Seeback continued to go up and down the road assessing the injuries and Gray's wife, Anne, went back to their home to grab another of the Pararescueman's medical bags from

their house.

"Basically, I was talking to people and asking them where they were hurt and not trying to alarm them," Seeback said.

With 24 years of Combat Controller experience behind him, he stayed calm and tried to make sure the rest of the injured didn't go into shock. He also had to calm one of the riders who wanted to confront the van driver.

"She (the driver) was not injured, but she was very hysterical," Seeback said. "I told the rider that this wasn't the time or place. The injured needed help."

As emergency personnel began arriving on scene, Seeback and Gray continued to provide care to the riders.

"Randy was directing the triage situation to the emergency personnel and I was barking out what I needed to the paramedics and they were tossing it to me without skipping a beat," said Gray.

They both helped emergency responders put the injured onto backboards and load them onto stretchers for transport to local hospitals.

With all the intense activity going on, didn't have time to identify himself to emergency personnel until the action died down. But the paramedics seemed to know Gray knew what he was doing.

"Having people around like these two guys is a resource that's unknown until something happens," said Capt. Troy Smith, Mary Esther Fire Department, who was one of the first emergency responders. "It was very nice having someone who knew what they were doing and knew how to care and finesse the injured without causing greater harm."

Gray is no stranger to crisis situations like this. During the course of his normal duties, he's responded to aircraft crashes and head-on collisions. He's even been a first responder to about eight off-duty accidents over the years.

"That's why we always travel with a med kit," he said. "If a person's dying, you do what you're trained to do and you save a life."



Cyclists watch as state troopers pick up the mangled remains of a bicycle in Ft. Walton Beach, Fla., after an accident. Northwest Florida Daily News courtesy photos



Tech. Sgt. Mike Gray (right), a Pararescuemen assigned to the 720th Special Tactics Group, Hurlburt Field, Fla., and Mr. Randy Seeback, a retired combat controller, responded to a vehicle accident involving eight bicycle riders (several from Hurlburt Field) in front of a local convenience store outside the Hurlburt Field gate after one of the bikes had blown a tire. As the riders were standing off the road, a 32-year-old Fort Walton Beach woman driving a Chevrolet Astro minivan drifted off the road and plowed through the group. Gray provided care for the injured while Seeback coordinated arrival of the authorities.